

ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	PERC-00
	DS-00	EUR-00	OIGO-00	FBIE-00	VC-00	H-00	TEDE-00
	INR-00	L-00	CAC-00	VCE-00	AC-00	NRC-00	NRRC-00
	NSAE-00	OES-00	OMB-00	NIMA-00	PA-00	MCC-00	PM-00
	ACE-00	FMPC-00	SP-00	SSO-00	SS-00	R-00	SSD-00
	PMB-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00	SWCI-00
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FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7691
INFO ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM
AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR
USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA
SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L HANOI 001179

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV AND EAP/K

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PARM](#) [PHUM](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [VM](#) [DPRK](#)

SUBJECT: VIETNAM-DPRK TIES: OPPORTUNITIES FOR AND
CONSTRAINTS ON POSITIVE ROLE FOR HANOI

REF: A. 03 HANOI 2650
[B.](#) 04 HANOI 2175
[C.](#) HANOI 204
[D.](#) HANOI 136

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., John Boardman per 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

[¶](#)1. (C) The Vietnam-DPRK bilateral relationship, although strained by last year's "mass defection" of North Korean asylum-seekers from Ho Chi Minh City to Seoul, is slowly returning to normal. Vietnam recognizes that its "traditional ties" with the North, combined with its proximity to China and economic reform experience, put it in the unique, and often difficult, position, of having to deal with North-South and DPRK-related issues. It appears that Vietnam is willing to use its position to make a positive, although very limited, contribution to efforts to both resolve the North Korean nuclear problem and encourage the DPRK to open up -- and the ROK is quietly encouraging Vietnam to do so. However, Hanoi's ties with Pyongyang also constrain its range of action, particularly in the case of DPRK asylum-seekers entering Vietnam. Although Vietnam's political ties with the DPRK are dwarfed by its economic relationship with the ROK, Vietnam will not turn its back on its old friend, and there may be future opportunities for Hanoi to take advantage of its "in" with Pyongyang. As the United States and Vietnam discuss regional and global matters of mutual concern, it may be worthwhile to encourage the Vietnamese to look beyond their immediate neighborhood and add DPRK-related matters to the list of issues in which we share an interest in addressing and resolving. End Summary and Comment.

"Traditional Friendship" Slowly on the Mend

[¶](#)2. (SBU) Pyongyang was among the first to establish diplomatic relations with Hanoi, and the "close and traditional ties" that North Korean and Vietnam came to enjoy were bolstered by the DPRK's assistance during the Vietnam War. Although the relationship suffered in the 1970s and 1980s because of Pyongyang's support for Pol Pot and its criticism of Vietnam for invading Cambodia, bilateral relations regained their footing in the 1980s. That said, while political ties are the mainstay of the Vietnam-DPRK relationship, in truth, Vietnam's growing trade and investment relations with South Korea offer more real value to Vietnam: the ROK was ranked seventh in two-way trade in 2003 and second (after the United States) in terms of investment in Vietnam in 2004; on the other hand, there does not appear to be any trade with the DPRK at all (Ref A). Furthermore, Vietnam and the ROK now regularly trade high-level visitors, while senior Vietnam-DPRK exchanges are increasingly moribund. However, political and ideological fraternity, close ties between the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Korean Workers Party and Vietnam's loyalty to an old ally ensure that Vietnam continues to honor North Korea with the title "traditional friend."

13. (SBU) The two countries' ties took a hit last July with the transport of 468 DPRK asylum-seekers from Ho Chi Minh City to Seoul (Ref B). In addition to lodging a number of official protests with Hanoi, Pyongyang recalled Ambassador Pak Ung Sop and publicly accused Vietnam of participating in a "mass kidnapping conspiracy." In subsequent months, several low- and mid-level bilateral exchanges were also cancelled.

14. (C) Relations now appear to be returning to normal. According to ROK Embassy DCM Bae Jae-hyun and MFA Korea Desk Director Tran Van Hieu, North Korean Ambassador Pak returned to Hanoi on March 27 (reportedly in time to prepare for and host the April 15 Kim Il-sung birthday event.) Bilateral exchanges are now back on track as well: Northeast Asia Institute (NAI) Director Ngo Xuan Binh told us that, in a recent conversation with North Korean Embassy officials, the two sides agreed that a delegation led by Binh could travel to Pyongyang for a visit hosted by the DPRK's Institute for International Relations.

Vietnam's Ties with the DPRK a Help and a Hindrance

15. (C) Vietnamese officials and academics acknowledge that Vietnam's long-standing ties with the DPRK, together with its economic reform experience and shared border with China, put it in a unique, and sometimes difficult, position to play some kind of role in a number of North-South and DPRK-related issues, namely: DPRK asylum-seekers, the North Korean nuclear problem and efforts to encourage Pyongyang to open up. They express a desire for Vietnam to take advantage of its situation to do something positive in dealing with these matters -- and note that the ROK is increasingly encouraging Vietnam to do so. But they also quickly point out that, while friendly relations with the DPRK give Vietnam an "in" that others do not have, these same relations have constrained its range of options, particularly in the case of asylum-seekers. Nevertheless, when circumstances allow, Vietnam seems to be attempting to play a limited, indirect and positive -- if not proactive -- role.

Asylum-Seekers: Avoid Straining Ties with the DPRK

16. (C) Although surprised and annoyed by North Korea's reaction to last year's "mass defection" (Ref C), Vietnam nonetheless appears to be working to prevent a repeat of the accumulation of DPRK asylum-seekers that ultimately led to strained relations with the North. A nine-year South Korean resident of Ho Chi Minh City told us that it is now "difficult" for North Koreans to make it to Vietnam from China and that South Korean residents here are fearful of drawing the attention of the police. South Korean Embassy Political First Secretary Lee Kang-kuk said that his Embassy believes there are "very few, if any" DPRK asylum-seekers now in Vietnam. (Note: It is unclear if this is because of a reduced inflow of asylum-seekers or an increased, and quiet, outflow, or both. End Note.) NAI's Director Binh noted that, while Vietnam recognizes the "humanitarian nature" of this issue, its policy is not to allow Vietnam to become a "refugee camp" (a desire he observed may be shared by the ROK.)

17. (C) Furthermore, even when Vietnam has also shown flexibility in dealing with North Korean asylum-seekers -- most recently in the case of the six North Koreans who entered the Swedish and French Embassy compounds last December (Ref D and previous) -- the Vietnamese authorities assiduously sought to avoid causing offense to the DPRK. According to Swedish DCM Helena Sangeland, although the Vietnamese were "very cooperative" in dealing with the situation, they nonetheless insisted on discretion and that the French and Swedes provide the North Koreans with travel documents. They also underlined that, in the event of future episodes, the North Koreans would have to be turned over to the GVN -- for eventual return to the country from which they crossed into Vietnam.

Nuclear Issue: Attempting to Send Indirect Message

18. (C) In the case of the North Korean nuclear issue, Vietnam is attempting to play a positive, if limited and indirect, role. During the April visit to Hanoi of ROK Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan, Vietnam State President Tran Duc Luong's position of "strong support" for the ROKG's "Peace and Prosperity Policy" was included in the two countries' joint statement. According to the ROK Embassy's Lee Kang-kuk, this was the "first time ever" the GVN went on record in support of South Korea's efforts to address the North Korean nuclear issue. MFA Korean Desk Director Hieu was less effusive, noting that, although this was the first direct reference to President No Moo-hyun's policy, this is not a "new position"

for Hanoi: "Vietnam's long-standing position has been to support a peaceful and non-nuclear Korean Peninsula. We are very concerned about the situation, and our position on North Korea's nuclear program is clear," he stressed.

¶ 9. (C) However, as much as Vietnam would like to make a positive contribution -- both to respond to the growing encouragement of the ROK and others and broaden Vietnam's diplomatic horizons -- "there are limits to what we can do to address this problem," Hieu continued. Because of Vietnam's relationship with the DPRK and its policy of non-interference in another country's internal affairs, "we are not in a position to do much. We must deal with this issue indirectly." Similarly, according to NAI's Binh, "we cannot

criticize the North directly, but what we can do is ensure that our message gets out in the press or on State-run television. When there are reports on TV or in Nhan Dan ('People's Daily', the Communist Party's newspaper) about Vietnam's support for a peaceful and non-nuclear Korean Peninsula, that is how we are delivering our views" to the North.

Vietnam as a Model: Yes, but...

¶ 10. (C) Both the MFA's Hieu and NAI's Binh observed that Vietnam "could be a model for North Korea in the areas of economic reform and opening up to the world." Vietnam's economic transition and "Doi Moi" (renovation) experience offer a more practical model than China, which is too large and decentralized (also Ref A). Similarly, MFA Asia Department Director General Nguyen Ba Cu told us that Vietnam's relationship with the United States could provide North Korea with a model of "two former enemies changing and improving their ties." In the area of economic reform, over the past several years several delegations of DPRK academics have visited Vietnam for two- to three-week "familiarization and training visits" organized by a Swedish university; the most recent visit was less than a month ago. In addition, according to the ROK Embassy DCM, South Korea recently quietly offered -- and Vietnam accepted -- financial assistance to launch a program bring DPRK officials to Vietnam for similar visits, and the ROK Embassy has approached the Swedes to learn about their ongoing program.

¶ 11. (SBU) Although our contacts acknowledge that Vietnam's reform experience and relationship with the DPRK put it in a unique position to reach out to and influence North Korea, they are nonetheless cautious about what, if any, effect Hanoi can have on Pyongyang. "The South Koreans wants us to encourage North Korea to open up. Unfortunately, our influence is more limited than they think," the MFA's Hieu said. He reiterated that, "Vietnam cannot interfere in North Korean internal issues." The NAI's Binh expressed a similar view, noting that, although Vietnam believed its experience could help North Korea, its influence is limited and that, for now, "lower-level official and academic exchanges will have to be enough." Recalling a conversation he had with the North Korean Ambassador, Binh said, "Ambassador Pak accused us of changing too much and selling out."

Comment

¶ 12. (C) The gap between Vietnam's economic relationship with the ROK and its political ties with the DPRK will likely continue to widen. Regardless, based on its historical ties with and loyalty to its old ally, it is doubtful that Hanoi will turn its back on the DPRK. Vietnam is seeking to broaden its own foreign policy horizons, and with the encouragement of the ROK, there may continue to be opportunities for it to use its relationship with the DPRK to make positive contributions to ongoing issues of interest. Any efforts in this regard will be limited, however, by Vietnam's lack of real leverage. As the United States and Vietnam discuss regional and global issues of mutual concern, it may be worth urging the Vietnamese to look beyond their immediate neighborhood and underline to them our shared interest in using whatever influence we can muster to address and resolve DPRK-related issues of concern. End Comment.

Boardman

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